

1926 - Murphy Goes to Sea (Again)

by Frank Start - VE3AJ

Late in '26 I joined an Imperial Oil tanker, the M/V Reginalite, in Montreal. This was one of three ships built in Stettin, Germany for the South American trade. Gross tonnage just over 9,000. Length 470 feet. Driven by twin screw diesel engines. All auxiliary machinery was electric drive. We cleared Montreal and headed for the sunny south. But, before we got there, I found out why the former radio operator had left the ship. In the Gulf of St. Lawrence it was wintry weather and I learned why the late operator had made the log entry "abandoned post owing to severe cold". However we were soon in better weather and enjoying the gentle breezes through the Windward Passage and across the Caribbean to the Cartagena. Then back to New York with a load of Columbian crude. Then we headed south again to Peru light ship. En route the Panama Canal, Murphy struck – in the engine room. We were down to one engine while the engineers changed a couple of pistons. These are, of course, similar to those in a car but much bigger. About five feet long and two feet in diameter. Replacement at sea can be tricky and is not to be tackled in bad weather.

Arriving at Colon, Canal Zone, we took on a pilot and proceeded through the canal. For those not familiar with the Panama Canal, the Atlantic end is further west than the Pacific end, believe it or not, and starts off with a straight stretch of seven miles. Then there are a series of three flight locks which take the ship the 85 feet above sea level. Then there is another 32 miles through the tropical jungle of Panama, then three more locks lower the ship to the Pacific level at Balboa. Fifty miles, deep sea to deep sea. Not long after we had passed the first set of locks, I heard a lot of queer noises, sounding as if the ship was taking a short-cut through the bush. Murphy had struck again. The electric steering gear this time. We had taken an unexpected sheer to starboard and scraped the rocky side of the canal bank. We had zigged instead of sagged. An inspection showed no serious damage and we were allowed to proceed. However, when we got to Balboa, the Canal Authority delayed us overnight for further investigation. This was where Murphy gave us a good turn. It gave those fortunate enough to get shore leave, a few hours ashore. Panama City, which is not far from Balboa, has some marvellous entertainment - after dark!

The following day, we cleared Balboa and headed for Talara, Peru, where International Petroleum had, at that time, a large refinery. This is a 1150 mile jaunt. Talara is about five degrees below the equator, but the climate is not tropical. In fact, it seldom rains on this coast and the evenings are quite cool.

We took on a full load of fuel oil for Peruvian ports further south and headed out to sea. On the bridge was the Master of the ship, the Port Captain (a Peruvian official) and the Pilot, also Peruvian. Peru, like most South American countries, like to exercise protocol whenever possible. When a foreign ship arrives in port, it must be flying the Peruvian flag at the foremast and the Captain must be at the accommodation ladder in full uniform to meet the Port Captain, the Pilot and all the other officials in brass buttons and gold braid. Anchored out in the harbour was a US freighter waiting to come into the dock with a full load of steel pipe. It was a beautiful clear day, not a cloud to be seen in the sky and the sunshine was sparkling on the water. I was in my

customary easy-chair, basking in the salubrious atmosphere, reading Playboy when I heard a commotion taking place on the Bridge just above me. The engine telegraph rang loud and long, the Quarter-Master was working hard at the wheel, the Skipper was cursing in English, the Pilot was doing likewise in Spanish and the Port Captain was adding to the profanity.

(And Murphy was about to strike): I glanced around to see where the freighter was at this time and there he was, STRAIGHT AHEAD. The irresistible force was about to meet the immovable object. The only breaking effort we had was the reversal of the main engines but nine thousand tons cannot be stopped in a hurry. We proceeded on a collision course. We could see many of the crew of the freighter gazing with apprehension at the approaching calamity. One pessimistic but quick-thinking sailor appeared on deck with his suitcase. When the collision finally happened, it was rather an anti-climax, not the violent clash of steel on steel. Just a very decided bump with ominous threat of things to come. Finally Reggie (that's short for Reginalite) slowly started to go astern. There was much activity in the freighter as men ran to get the anchor up and the ship gradually got underway and headed for the beach. When the "Craster Kall" finally came to rest on the shore, only the forecastle head, the flying bridge and the top of the funnel could be seen. No doubt the owners, Bethlehem Steel Co., wrote to Imperial Oil shortly after this episode. It was fortunate that it happened at a time when I usually have my siesta. On the other hand, no operator had to turn out in the middle of the night to send SOS or find out what had got in the way.

So we carried on and got to Balboa C. Z.. Without further mishap, ready for our return trip through the Canal. But, Murphy was not letting us alone yet. The Steering gear gave trouble a third time. We almost made it through the Canal when again we sheered to starboard. Again there were rock in the way and this time the hull suffered damage, a few small punctures around the waterline. The ship was delayed for repairs at Cristbal. And again this was fortunate and the lucky few got ashore for a night in Colon, where the night-life is the kind you read about.